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PAULO AFONSO FALLS

This magnificent cataract, on the São Francisco River, is the outstanding scenic wonder of the Northeast. It is located about 400 miles southwest of Recife, and 500 miles northwest of Bahia. Until recently difficult of access, it may now, because of improvements in the roads, which are still far from perfect, be reached from Recife in twelve hours of easy driving. It is probably named for its discoverer, but the name goes back so far that I was unable to find anyone who could inform me certainly on this point. At the falls, the river forms the boundary line between the states of Alagoas and Bahia.

To get to the falls, you must go to Pedra, on the Alagoas side, about fifteen miles from the falls. The real name of the place is Delmiro, but the people for the most part still call it by the name it had years ago. At Pedra, or Delmiro, you must secure a permit to visit the falls, because the only approach to the falls on that side is on private property, belonging to an English firm that about thirty years ago installed a small hydro-electric plant there, to furnish power for their cotton mill at Pedra. The officials are very gracious about giving the permission, but insist that no one go without it.

The road to the falls (from Pedra) is always passable, but never good. It passes through typical sertão scenery, scanty forest, with abundance of cactus and other thorny growths, hills crowned with granite boulders, from which the soil has long since been eroded by the wind; but it has withal a sort of greenness about it that suggests that the rainfall here may not be quite so scanty as in most of the sertão. The first view of the site of the falls is most unimpressive, as one looks out from the last meager height on the road over a flat expanse, with two or three insignificant looking buildings in the distance, and, especially if the river be high, now and then a wisp of spray to indicate the presence of the falls. Soon after, the visitor arrives at a locked gate, where someone finally appears, to receive the pass and open the gate, permitting the car to travel another half mile to the parking ground at the end of the trestle. This trestle, which is the only approach to the falls, is about one fourth of

a mile in length, spanning a rocky gorge which at the deepest point must be sixty or seventy feet deep, and through which, at high stages of the river, flows a foaming torrent, to form a separate element of the falls. The trestle is laid with rails, and has planks in the center for walking, and one may cross on foot or on a little push car with seats on it. Stout hearted travelers often quail at the sight of this crossing. I saw one lady, perhaps not stout hearted, cross on the car with her eyes tightly shut, and her face and arms were covered with great drops of perspiration when she reached the other side. The trestle looks old and rotten, and shakes abominably. I crossed on foot the first time, not without fear, I confess. Especially when the water is flowing underneath, if one has not a pretty steady head he may easily become giddy. In addition, you have sometimes to meet someone in crossing, and the way seems narrow indeed for passing. On reaching the other side, you find that the buildings you saw from a distance have become about eight or ten small houses for residence of the workmen and their families, a little bar, and a shop of some kind, the hydro-electric installations being of course far down the cliff side. You walk along in front of these buildings for about a hundred yards, and suddenly the whole glory of the falls is revealed to you, beyond description grand and impressive.

I said, the whole glory of it. Actually, one feature of this falls is that there is no point from which the whole fall may be seen at one time. People say that it is divided into seven separate falls. Really, I found it difficult to count them, for it is not easy to say just where one ends and another begins. The water comes tumbling down over the rocks, dividing and reuniting, descending in great bounds into the gorge. There is one stream that somehow gets separated from the rest of the river, and flowing along the cliff top on the Bahia side, plunges straight down, in the highest single fall, though a relatively small volume of water. It is, of course, called the "bridal veil". Finally, rounding a sharp corner of rock as it does so, the whole river, including the "bridal veil", gathers itself together in one final plunge into the depths. Books say that the total height of the falls is 275 feet; and this last leap must be seventy-five or eighty, although it does not appear high when observed from the cliff top, far above. To my mind, this last leap is the most



impressive part of the whole falls, though the upper part is the part generally photographed and publicized.

The gorge into which the river falls is very narrow, so narrow just below the falls that one feels, from the top, that he could almost leap across it. Naturally, such appearances are deceptive. About half a mile below the falls there is a sharp right angle bend in the gorge, and just at this point there is a cave on the Alagoas side, which is accessible to agile climbers. For a part of the way down the cliff side steps have either been cut in the stone, or built up with cement; but the last part is unspoiled by any tool of man, and great care is required in order to avoid a dangerous fall. The cave does not amount to much when you get to it. I doubt if it would be possible to go in more than two hundred feet, and most visitors are turned back much nearer the entrance by the foul odor of the bats that inhabit it in great numbers.

If the visitor is prudent, he will plan his trip so as to spend the night in Pedra, where hotel accommodations are above the average of interior towns, and visit the falls in the morning. There are two reasons for this: first, the falls are seen to much better advantage by the light of the morning sun, from the Alagoas side, and secondly, the sun, beating on those bare cliffs, heats the place up until in the afternoon it is almost intolerable. There are few trees, and little soil to support a growth of trees. Groups of picnickers sometimes plan to spend the entire day; but most people, by one or two in the afternoon have seen quite enough. The best plan is to be there by eight, and leave at eleven.

The São Francisco River is subject to tremendous floods, and these of course make quite a difference in the aspect of the falls. The rainy season on the headwaters of the river begins normally in October or November, and the high water may begin to arrive at the falls early in December. Around Christmas time the water is generally pretty high. It is muddy of course, but that makes little difference in the beauty of the falls. Brazilians often asked me for some comparison with Niagara Falls, but of course it is difficult to compare two cataracts so unlike in appearance. The Niagara River, coming from a lake, is pretty uniform in height and appearance, while

the São Francisco varies greatly. The total height of the Paulo Afonso Falls far exceeds that of Niagara, but it lacks the grandeur of a single drop. I have no statistics on the point, but from observation my guess would be that at its lowest stages the São Francisco carries substantially less water than the Niagara, while at flood stages it far exceeds it.

There has long been talk in Brazil of the development of electric power from this great source of power that lies unused in the wilderness. The great difficulty in the way of such a plan is the fact that it does lie so far out in the wilderness, being, as I have said, four or five hundred miles from the two principal cities of the Northeast. There are lesser cities and towns, some of them somewhat nearer; but lines of transmission would have to be built for hundreds of miles through country of which the greater part has only a town of three or four thousand people every thirty or forty miles. There is the little plant now in use for supplying power to the factory at Pedra, but that is relatively insignificant. It seems that the government has a plan for some sort of development beginning now, however, and when I last visited the falls in January, 1949 there were buildings being constructed on the Bahia side, a mile or so below the falls, which I was told were to be the first units of that plan of power development. How big a program is planned, or whether the government will really go through with it, I am unable to say. There is certainly plenty of potential; though full advantage cannot be taken of the fall, due to the fact that at flood stages the river rises very high in the lower gorge. I visited the present installations, which I should guess to be nearly 100 feet above the low water level of the river in the gorge below the falls; and yet I was told that in one or two exceptional floods the river has actually risen to the point of inundating the power house, and necessitating shutting down the machinery.

The scenic value of the falls is impressing itself more and more on the Brazilian people, so that ever larger numbers come to see them. If they could be made more accessible these numbers would be multiplied many hundred fold. Roads have been improved a great deal, but many improvements are still needed. A bridge over the river at the falls would not be difficult, I believe, from an engineering point of view,



and would add a great deal to the convenience of tourists and of the local community. And if in addition to making the falls accessible, the visit to the place could be made more comfortable, this would serve to increase even more the number of visitors. Trees could be planted, even if it were necessary to blast out holes in the rock and bring in soil to fill them. Water is there, and with a little money and effort beautiful shady parks on both sides of the river could relieve in large measure the sweltering heat that renders the place all but insupportable in the afternoons. The dangerous and inconvenient trestle that forms the only approach to the falls on the Alagoas side should be replaced by a modern bridge, and adequate hotels could provide greater comfort than is available now.

This is the way an American looks at it -- a sort of national park idea. But the Brazilians are fast becoming tourist conscious; and I predict that it will not be many years before all these changes will have taken place. Paulo Afonso Falls is certainly too important a scenic asset to be allowed forever to rest in obscurity in the wilderness.